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ABSTRACT

A study determined whether using reader response logs in an introductory college literature class would prove to be an effective method of helping students learn to apply the critical methodology important to increasing understanding of literature. Subjects, 33 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory literature course, wrote response logs to short stories, drama, and poetry. Analysis was limited to the sections of the response logs dealing with short stories because of the bulk of material. The majority of the responses to the short stories could be placed in seven major categories: affective responses, summaries, queries, associative responses, reflective responses, interpretive responses, and inferential responses. Results indicated that entries tended to fall into one of three groupings: (1) entries from four students that, from beginning to end, reflected a high level of understanding and richness in the quality of writing; (2) entries which showed the greatest evidence of change from beginning to end; and (3) entries from one-third of the students that began at a low, surface level and remained at that level throughout the course. Findings suggest that some students have more success than others in making use of response logs for learning literature. Findings further suggest that some students took more advantage of instructor and student feedback to make changes in their log entries, and made more use of in-class discussion in arriving at ideas for writing. (Twenty-four references are attached.) (RS)

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READER RESPONSE LOGS AS A LEARNING DEVICE IN LITERATURE CLASSES

A Paper Presented at

NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE

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READER RESPONSE LOGS AS A LEARNING DEVICE IN LITERATURE CLASSES

Recent research (Harris, 1990; Nist & Simpson, 1986; Simpson & Nist, 1990;) has indicated that methods of annotating and underlining can help students learn to process expository text more effectively than use of underlining alone. Processing of literature, however, presents special problems for students because the nature of such study requires that students grasp global concepts rather than factual information and that they learn to read stories and poems on multiple levels. Incorporation of such abstract notions as, say, theme and symbolism, figures heavily into the determination of literary meaning.

This study was conducted in an effort to determine whether using reader response logs in an introductory college literature class would prove to be an effective method of helping students learn to apply the critical methodology important to increasing understanding of literature. The study focused on these questions:

1. Does use of reader response logs which require students to write about their reading result in increased learning of critical approaches to literature?

2. Will methods of literary analysis taught in class be reflected in journal entries?

3. What differentiates a "good" or effective log entry from "poor" or less effective entries?

4. Will analysis of the log entries indicate methods or approaches to improve future teaching and better use of the reader response logs?

Rationale

The use of journals or logs for enhancement of student learning has become a fairly widespread practice in recent years. Mitchell (1990) located twenty-three articles published between 1980 and 1990 relating to the use of student-written dialogue journals. Use of such journals ranges over a wide spectrum of ages and grade levels, from third and fourth grade (Kelly, 1990; Wollman-Bonilla, 1989) through college (Blatt & Rosen, 1984; Browning, 1986; Frager & Malena, 1986; Newton, 1991; Rupert & Brueggman, 1986; Scriven, 1989; VanDeWeghe, 1987). Virtually all of the articles written about the use of journals speaks of this use in highly positive terms. Browning says that her students "read a wider variety of materials and enjoyed reading more" (p. 43). Rupert and Brueggeman say that the use of journals gives students "self-direction and control over the learning situation throught self-selection of materials to be read and expression of personal reactions" (p. 27). Blatt and Rosen believe "writing can powerfully enhance the personal literary experience of each reader" (p. 9) and add that the "interaction of reading and writing strengthens both students' writing and their ability to relate to literature" (p. 9). Fulwiler (1980) notes that using journal writing works, because "every time students write, they individualize instruction" (p. 16). Despite this apparently

widespread use of journals and the almost universal belief in their benefits. Mitchell observes that "little carefully documented research has been presented in professional educational journals which influence curricular decisions" (9). The point is a valid one. Little research seems to have been done which would support instructors' intuitive belief in the value of the student learning log.

Even so, research on writing to learn would indicate support for use of learning logs in content area classrooms. Emig (1977) speaks of writing as a "unique mode of learning" (p. 122) and contends that writing "requires the establishment of systematic connections and relationships" (p. 126) in the making of meaning. Newell (1986) says that the use of writing to learn may lead to the generation of new knowledge. Easley (1989) refers to the use of writing to make sense of experience because it "requires a conscious search for meaning out of meaninglessness" (p. 11). As Langer and Applebee (1987) note, "There is clear evidence that activities involving writing...lead to better learning than activities involving reading and studying only" (p. 135). Marshall's (1987) research with students in secondary English classes indicated that extensive writing, whether formal or informal (personal), resulted in more significant posttest gains than were obtained with either short answer writing or no writing at all.

Finally, reader response theory suggests that encouraging students to begin a study of literature with an analysis of their

initial reactions to a work of fiction is an effective way of entering into a literary learning experience. Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that an overemphasis on the text--the work itself--forces students to become "efferent" readers, memorizing factual information, rather than "aesthetic" readers, those who read for a larger effect or "evocation" of a work. Kirby, Nist, and Simpson (1986) point out that most students "believe that meaning resides in a text to be discovered by the reader and judged right or wrong by the teacher" (p. 14). Combating this mindset, with its emphasis on the one true meaning, may be best accomplished by allowing students to operate from a reader response approach, which according to Chase and Hynd (1987), operates from the following assumptions:

(1) Meaning is not "contained" in the text, but is derived from an interaction between the content and structure of the author's message and the experience and prior knowledge of the reader.

(2) Readers comprehend differently because every reader is culturally and individually unique.

(3) Examining readers' responses to text is more valid than extablishing one "correct" interpretation of text meaning (p. 531).

Methodology

Subjects in the study were thirty-three undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory literature course. A written survey of student attitudes administered at the beginning of the

course indicated that most students were reluctant about, if not actively hostile to the reading of serious literature. Students were given response guidelines early in the course to help them make judgments as to what to include in their responses. Among the questions they were encouraged to answer in their responses were the following:

What is your initial reaction to the story?

Does this story remind you of anything you've read before?

Does this story remind you of a personal experience?

What do you know about this writer/story/subject?

If your reaction to this story has been particularly strong, why do you believe that is true?

Students were further cautioned that it was not necessary to include a plot summary; they should assume that the reader of the logs had also read the material, so reactions need not include detailed references to the works.

Logs were read initially by the researcher at the end of the third week of class, after discussion of literary conventions had begun, giving time for reading and for assimilation of lecture material. Subsequently, the class was divided into five reading groups. Members of the groups exchanged logs and read and responded to each other's entries on a weekly basis. Logs were read again by the researcher at midterm and three weeks before the end of the term.

By the end of the term, the sheer bulk of the material collected had reached such proportions that the researcher chose

to concentrate the analysis of the logs on the portion of the course which covered short stories. Responses to the poetry and drama sections of the course offered more material than could be easily assimilated into a paper of this length, and responses to the short stories dealt with a compact segment of the material being studied.

Initial and subsequent readings of the logs led to the researcher's determination that the majority of responses to the short stories could be placed in seven major categories. These categories were suggested by the Mitchell-Irwin Retelling Profile (1991), and are similar to those used by Squire (1964); they are as follows:

1. Affective responses

These were very general indications of how students felt about works and included statements such as "I liked it...". "This was boring...", usually with little elaboration or explanation.

2. Summaries

Although students were specifically instructed not to write summaries, one common response was a summary of plot action.

3. Queries

Because students knew the logs would be read by the instructor and by other students, many included questions to be brought up in discussion or to be answered by readers. Queries were not always posed as questions; some were in statement form,

but indicated a lack of understanding, however phrased.

4. Associative responses

These responses included those items suggested by the prompts: personal reminiscences associated with the reading, recollections of other works similar to the one being read, or identification of the writer with a character in the story.

5. Reflective responses

Responses were sometimes generalized statements about life elicited by the work, or were statements which put certain aspects of the story into a larger context. "I think this story is an example of what happens when people don't try to understand each other.." might begin a reflective response.

6. Interpretive responses

These responses represented students' attempts to interpret meanings of the stories based on concepts under study. Students might make statements as to their opinions of actions in the stories, then back them up with quotations or examples from the reading. Interpretive responses dealt with students' attempts to make meaning of the stories based on what was explicitly stated in the text.

7. Inferential responses

Inferential responses were those which attempted to see not only content but multiple layers of meaning in the stories. Inferential responses might attempt to locate and explain symbolism and allegory, for instance. Statements of theme were often included in inferential responses. While interpretive

responses dealt with the what of the stories, inferential responses frequently dealt with the why and the meaning in the stories. Inferential responses were based on acknowledgement of what was implicit in the text.

Results

Analysis of the logs was accomplished by color coding the entries with each response type highlighted in a different color. A response was defined, for purposes of this study, as a single unit of thought written in reaction to what was read. For example, a fairly lengthy narrative relating an incident in the reader's past to an incident in the story might comprise several sentences or even paragraphs, but was counted only as a single response. By contrast, a single sentence might contain more than one type of response.

In applying this system of analysis to the logs, the researcher's initial assumption was that the system was hierarchical, and that those logs which were most indicative of the application of literary critical methodology would have entries heavily weighted toward the upper end of the scale. That is, they would include largely reflective, interpretive, and inferential responses. This proved to be only partly true. For one thing, the categories tend to be less oriented to high/low levels than to reader-centered or text-centered response. Further, when the logs were color coded, it became immediately obvious that those log entries which were richest and most perceptive were those that included most, if not all, of the

response types. While the inferential responses, for instance, represented a more insightful reaction to the reading than did the affective responses, the strongest writers also included affective responses, brief summaries, queries, and associative responses. The difference between strong and weak responses was breadth of response as well as depth. With some exceptions, those entries which were based on only one response type were the weakest log entries.

After the logs had been color coded, they were compared in an effort to determine whether changes in the numbers and types of entries from the beginning of the short story unit until the end reflected increased understanding of the material. Entries tended to fall into one of three groupings:

Group 1 consisted of those entries which, from the beginning to the end, reflected a high level of understanding and a richness in the quality of the writing. These entries did not change greatly in the course of the class, probably because there was little need for change. Students in this group were, for the most part, students who had had some experience in literary analysis before taking the class. The entries made by this group of four or five students were of consistently high quality. Entries made by this group were of value to this study in that they helped to define the standard by which other entries were evaluated.

Group 2 was comprised of those entries which showed the greatest evidence of change from beginning to end. Those entries

were examined in some detail to determine whether there were principles that might be derived from these logs and applied to future use of response logs in literature classes. This group will be discussed in more detail below.

Group 3, approximately one-third of the class, produced those logs which showed the weakest entries. Like Group 1, this group's entries showed little change from beginning to end. Unlike Group 1, however, those entries began at a low, or surface response level, and ended at that same level. Members of this group seemed to find security in writing relatively formulaic responses which met the course requirement at the lowest acceptable level. Neither commentary by the instructor nor reactions of their reading groups managed to jar these writers from what were largely one-note responses. Many of these entries were story summaries. Some were lengthy expressions of displeasure or boredom with stories. Most of these entries were concentrated in the first three or four levels of the response analysis, with few entries incorporating reflective, interpretive, or inferential responses.

Group 3 represented, numerically, the smallest portion of the class, yet the size of the group was disturbing to the instructor. If a third of the class made little sense of the material being studied, some questions needed to be asked about the teaching methods being used, including the use of logs. Of course, reading logs constituted only one portion of the course work, and multiple variables impinge upon learning in any class.

Whether the logs aided learning or merely reflected it is difficult to assess; the answer is probably both. Even a high correlation of low-level logs to low grades is not an indication of the usefulness of the logs, since grades were partially based on the log entries.

The entries collected from Group 2 seem to offer more clues about ways of looking at log entries than do entries from either of the other groups. The Group 2 entries showed considerable change from beginning to end based on several criteria. For one thing, the number of different types of entries increased in all of these logs. Also, there was a move in the percentage of entries from the lower levels to the more difficult levels in most cases. In some of the entries, the number of entry types almost doubled. In other cases, the entry numbers did not increase a great deal, but the distribution of the entries across the categories changed considerably.

Assessment of the Group 1 and 2 logs indicates that some students have more success than others in making use of response logs for learning literature, but does not lead to the conclusion that those students who are less successful cannot learn to use the logs to greater advantage. On the contrary, the improvement of the Group 2 logs offers several implications for future teaching.

Implications

The students in Group 2 seemed to have taken more advantage of instructor and student feedback to make changes in their log

entries. Further, they seemed to make more use of in-class discussion in arriving at ideas for writing. In future classes in beginning literature, the following changes in procedure for using the logs might help reluctant writers learn to make more use of the logs for learning the material:

1. Teach directly to the response categories. The researcher, unaware of what entries were likely to contain, did not recognize that varying the response entries would likely offer a higher level of learning. Having learned this, further study will include teaching to that variety.

2. Offer a larger variety of writing prompts. The ones used in this study seem limited in retrospect.

3. Use class time to guide students through several responses. Making use of the prompts in class would allow for questioning and sharing of responses on the spot.

4. Offer a model of an effective response selected from logs already collected.

5. Pair effective and ineffective writers. Since logs are shared among groups anyway, pairing of students to work together on occasion might be helpful to those writers who are having trouble.

6. As stories become more difficult, offer prompts geared directly to specific stories.

A further study making use of these conclusions in a more structured writing format is planned for spring semester, and results of that study will be compared to this one to determine

whether more careful guidance in writing logs results in more effective learning.

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